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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Convergence of Ikigai and Design Thinking: Crafting a Purposeful Framework

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ABSTRACT

In an era where innovation is not just about solving problems but also about enhancing human experiences and fostering personal fulfillment, the convergence of Ikigai principles with Design Thinking methodology offers a promising avenue for holistic problem-solving and innovation. This paper explores the intersection of Ikigai—a Japanese concept representing one's reason for being—and Design Thinking—a human-centered approach to innovation. We propose a conceptual framework, termed Ikigai-Driven Design (IDD), which integrates the principles of Ikigai with the stages of Design Thinking. IDD comprises five main stages: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test, each combining elements of Ikigai and Design Thinking to foster purposeful innovation. The Empathize stage emphasizes understanding what users love and what the world needs, drawing insights from human-centered research methods. In the Define stage, practitioners frame problems through the lens of Ikigai, aligning identified needs with their own passions and strengths. The Ideate stage encourages divergent thinking, leveraging practitioners' Ikigai to generate creative solutions. Prototypes created in the Prototype stage embody practitioners' purpose and values, tested and refined based on user feedback in the Test stage. By integrating Ikigai principles with Design Thinking methodology, IDD offers a structured yet flexible approach to innovation that resonates deeply with users and contributes to practitioners' sense of fulfillment and meaning.

Keywords: Ikigai, Design thinking, Convergence, Purposeful design, Innovation, Human-centered, Conceptual integration, Methodology, Harmonization, Problem-solving, Creative process, Ideation, User-centric approach

1. Introduction

In today's complex and rapidly changing world, individuals and organizations seek frameworks that not only foster innovation and problem-solving but also promote personal fulfillment and societal impact. Ikigai, a Japanese concept translating to "a reason for being," offers a holistic approach to discovering purpose by aligning passion, mission, vocation, and profession. Design Thinking, on the other hand, is a human-centered problem-solving methodology widely adopted by innovators and organizations worldwide [1]. It emphasizes empathy, creativity, and iterative prototyping to address challenges and create meaningful solutions. Both Ikigai principles and Design Thinking methodology share a fundamental focus on understanding human needs, fostering creativity, and striving for holistic solutions that enhance well-being. Thus, exploring the convergence of Ikigai and Design Thinking holds immense significance in bridging the gap between personal fulfillment and societal innovation [2].

The exploration of Ikigai principles within the context of Design Thinking methodology presents a unique opportunity to integrate purpose-driven approaches into innovation processes [3]. By combining the introspective elements of Ikigai—such as self-awareness, passion, and personal fulfillment—with the collaborative and user-centered aspects of Design Thinking, individuals and organizations can develop

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frameworks that not only solve complex problems but also align with their core values and aspirations [1–3]. This convergence offers a pathway for designing solutions that resonate deeply with users, leading to greater adoption, satisfaction, and impact. Moreover, it enables a shift from purely transactional relationships to more meaningful and sustainable engagements, fostering long-term trust and loyalty [4].

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of how the principles of Ikigai can enrich the practice of Design Thinking, leading to the development of a purposeful framework for innovation and problem-solving. By synthesizing insights from literature, case studies, and practical experiences, we will elucidate the commonalities between Ikigai and Design Thinking, identify synergies between the two approaches, and propose a conceptual framework that integrates their core principles. Through this examination, we seek to not only deepen our understanding of both Ikigai and Design Thinking but also inspire individuals and organizations to adopt purpose-driven approaches to innovation. The structure of this paper will comprise an in-depth discussion of Ikigai principles and Design Thinking methodology, followed by an exploration of their convergence and the crafting of a purposeful framework.

2. Understanding Ikigai

Ikigai, originating from the Japanese culture, represents a profound concept that encapsulates the essence of finding purpose and meaning in life. The term “Ikigai” consists of two Japanese words, “iki” meaning life and “gai” meaning worth or value. While there is no direct translation in English, Ikigai is often described as “a reason for being” or “the joy of living.” Its origins can be traced back to the island of Okinawa, known for its high life expectancy and strong sense of community. In Okinawan culture, Ikigai is deeply ingrained in daily life and is associated with longevity, happiness, and fulfillment [5].

At the heart of Ikigai are four interrelated components that guide individuals towards their purpose: what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. These components form the intersection of passion, vocation, mission, and profession, creating a holistic framework for personal fulfillment and contribution to society. “What you love” refers to activities or pursuits that bring joy, fulfillment, and a sense of flow. “What you are good at” encompasses skills, talents, and strengths that individuals possess and can leverage to make a meaningful impact. “What the world needs” emphasizes the importance of addressing societal challenges and contributing to the well-being of others. Finally, “what you can be paid for” acknowledges the practical aspect of sustaining oneself financially while pursuing meaningful work [6].

Beyond its practical applications, Ikigai carries profound cultural and philosophical implications that reflect broader societal values and perspectives on life. In Japanese culture, Ikigai is deeply intertwined with concepts such as interconnectedness, harmony, and the pursuit of balance. It underscores the importance of finding harmony between personal aspirations and societal needs, individual desires, and collective well-being. Moreover, Ikigai encourages a mindful approach to life, where individuals cultivate self-awareness, purposeful action, and a sense of gratitude for the present moment. Philosophically, Ikigai invites contemplation on the nature of fulfillment, the pursuit of happiness, and the quest for a meaningful existence in an ever-changing world. It prompts individuals to reflect on their values, priorities, and contributions to society, fostering a deeper understanding of the purpose of life itself [7].

3. Exploring design thinking

Design Thinking is a problem-solving methodology that prioritizes empathy, creativity, and iterative collaboration to address complex challenges and develop innovative solutions. At its core, Design Thinking is a human-centered approach that seeks to deeply understand the needs, desires, and experiences of end-users. It emphasizes a holistic understanding of problems and opportunities, enabling designers and innovators to uncover insights and develop solutions that resonate deeply with users. Unlike traditional problem-solving approaches, Design Thinking encourages a mindset of curiosity, experimentation, and learning from failure, fostering a culture of innovation and continuous improvement [2].

The Design Thinking process consists of five distinct stages: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. In the Empathize stage, designers immerse themselves in the users’ context to gain a deep understanding of their needs, motivations, and challenges. This involves conducting interviews, observations, and empathy-building exercises to uncover insights and empathize with users’ experiences. The Define stage involves synthesizing the insights gathered during the Empathize stage to define the core problem or opportunity statement. This stage requires designers to frame the problem in a human-centered and actionable way, setting the foundation for the subsequent stages of ideation, prototyping, and testing.

One of the defining features of Design Thinking is its human-centered approach, which places the

needs and experiences of end-users at the forefront of the design process. Unlike traditional problem-solving methods that prioritize technical or business requirements, Design Thinking starts by understanding the people who will ultimately use the product or service being designed. By empathizing with users, designers gain valuable insights into their behaviors, preferences, and pain points, which serve as the basis for ideation and solution development. This human-centered approach ensures that designs are not only functional and efficient but also meaningful and impactful, leading to solutions that truly resonate with users and address their needs in innovative ways [5].

4. The intersection of Ikigai and design thinking

Commonalities between Ikigai principles and Design Thinking methodology highlight shared values and approaches that can enhance both personal fulfillment and innovation processes. Both Ikigai and Design Thinking emphasize a human-centered approach, focusing on understanding and addressing the needs, desires, and experiences of individuals. For example, the "what the world needs" component of Ikigai aligns with the empathize stage of Design Thinking, where designers seek to deeply understand users' perspectives and challenges. Similarly, the "what you love" aspect of Ikigai resonates with the ideation stage of Design Thinking, where creativity and exploration are encouraged to generate innovative solutions. By recognizing these commonalities, individuals and organizations can integrate Ikigai principles into the Design Thinking process, fostering a more holistic approach to problem-solving and innovation [8].

Design Thinking offers a framework for individuals to explore and pursue their Ikigai by providing a structured methodology for problem-solving and creativity. Through its human-centered approach, Design Thinking encourages individuals to empathize with others, identify unmet needs, and develop solutions that align with their own passions and strengths. By engaging in the Design Thinking process, individuals can uncover opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the world while pursuing work that brings them joy and fulfillment. Additionally, the iterative nature of Design Thinking allows individuals to experiment, iterate, and refine their ideas, enabling them to align their pursuits with their evolving sense of purpose and meaning. Thus, Design Thinking serves as a catalyst for individuals to explore and actualize their Ikigai, fostering personal growth, satisfaction, and impact [9].

Conversely, Ikigai principles can enrich the Design Thinking process by providing a deeper sense of purpose and meaning to innovation efforts. By incorporating Ikigai principles such as self-awareness, passion, and contribution into the design process, designers can develop solutions that resonate more deeply with users and address fundamental human needs. For example, by aligning with their own Ikigai, designers can infuse their work with authenticity, creativity, and empathy, resulting in solutions that are not only functional but also meaningful and impactful. Moreover, Ikigai principles encourage designers to consider the long-term implications of their designs, fostering a more sustainable and ethical approach to innovation. By integrating Ikigai principles into the Design Thinking process, designers can create solutions that not only solve problems but also enrich lives and contribute to the well-being of society as a whole [10].

5. Crafting a purposeful framework

To bridge the principles of Ikigai with the methodology of Design Thinking, we propose a conceptual framework that harmonizes the human-centered aspects of both approaches. This framework, termed Ikigai-Driven Design (IDD), comprises five main stages: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. Each stage integrates elements of Ikigai and Design Thinking, creating a holistic process that fosters purposeful innovation.

Empathize: In the Empathize stage of IDD, practitioners immerse themselves in the lived experiences of users, stakeholders, and communities to gain deep insights into their needs, desires, and aspirations. Drawing from Ikigai principles, this stage emphasizes the importance of understanding what users love and what the world needs. By empathizing with diverse perspectives and contexts, practitioners cultivate a sense of empathy and connection, laying the foundation for meaningful innovation. Design Thinking methodologies such as user interviews, observations, and journey mapping are employed to uncover latent needs and empathize with users' emotions and experiences [11].

Define: In the Define stage, practitioners synthesize the insights gathered during the Empathize stage to define the problem or opportunity statement in a human-centered and actionable manner. This stage integrates elements of Ikigai by aligning the identified needs with practitioners' own passions and strengths. By framing the problem through the lens of Ikigai, practitioners ensure that their pursuits are purpose-driven and resonate with their intrinsic motivations. Design Thinking tools such as problem framing,

persona development, and empathy mapping are utilized to distill insights and define the core challenge or opportunity [22].

Ideate: The Ideate stage encourages practitioners to generate a wide range of creative solutions that address the defined problem or opportunity. Building upon the principles of Ikigai, this stage fosters a mindset of exploration, experimentation, and ideation. Practitioners draw from their passions and strengths, as well as the identified needs of users and society, to ideate innovative solutions that align with their Ikigai. Design Thinking techniques such as brainstorming, mind mapping, and rapid prototyping are employed to facilitate divergent thinking and generate novel ideas.

Prototype: In the Prototype stage, practitioners transform selected ideas into tangible representations that can be tested and refined. This stage combines elements of Ikigai by encouraging practitioners to embody their purpose and values in the design of prototypes. By infusing prototypes with authenticity and meaning, practitioners ensure that their solutions resonate with users and address their underlying needs. Design Thinking methodologies such as iterative prototyping, co-creation, and visual storytelling are utilized to create low-fidelity prototypes that capture key aspects of the proposed solutions [13].

Test: The Test stage involves gathering feedback from users and stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of the prototypes. This stage integrates elements of Ikigai by emphasizing the importance of continuous learning and adaptation. Practitioners leverage feedback to refine their solutions iteratively, ensuring that they align with users' needs and practitioners' own Ikigai. Design Thinking methodologies such as usability testing, pilot studies, and iterative refinement are employed to validate solutions and iterate based on user feedback.

In summary, the Ikigai-Driven Design framework offers a structured yet flexible approach to innovation that combines the human-centered principles of Ikigai with the iterative methodologies of Design Thinking. By integrating elements of Ikigai and Design Thinking across each stage of the framework, practitioners can create purposeful solutions that resonate deeply with users and contribute to their own sense of fulfillment and meaning [14].

6. Case studies

6.1. The nori intervention: A model for local action

In the 1950s, Japan faced a serious childhood malnutrition problem. A key solution involved incorporating Nori, a readily available and affordable source of vitamins and minerals–seaweed–into school lunches. This simple, culturally relevant intervention significantly improved children's health [15].

Think Globally, Act Locally: Applying the Nori Lesson

The Nori story offers a powerful message for developing countries:

Identify Local Staples: Focus on fortifying or incorporating nutrient-rich, locally available foods into school meals. These could be indigenous fruits, vegetables, or underutilized grains.

Culturally Relevant Solutions: Programs should resonate with local traditions and preferences. This fosters acceptance and long-term sustainability.

Community Involvement: Engage local farmers and communities in producing and supplying these nutritious ingredients for school meals. This strengthens local economies and fosters ownership.

6.2. Indonesia: A case for local action

Indonesia, with its diverse agricultural landscape, presents a perfect example for applying the "think globally, act locally" approach. Here's how:

Nutrient-Rich Local Staples: Indonesia boasts a wealth of nutrient-rich options like sweet potatoes (vitamin A), Moringa leaves (iron and calcium), and tempeh (protein). These can be incorporated into school meals.

Culturally-Sensitive Menus: Indonesian cuisine often features rice and vegetables. School meals can build on this foundation by adding these locally sourced, fortified options.

Community Partnerships: Partnering with local farmers to supply these ingredients can create a sustainable food system for school meals.

Beyond Nori: A Call to Action

The Nori intervention serves as a powerful reminder that solutions to complex problems often lie in leveraging local resources and traditions. By adopting a "think globally, act locally" approach, developing countries like Indonesia can design effective and culturally relevant nutrition programs for their school children. This approach, combined with investment in education and sanitation, has the potential to break the cycle of malnutrition and create a healthier future for generations to come. The relentless rise in global temperatures and looming threat of climate change demand drastic solutions. While human activity plays a major role, a surprising factor might contribute to this crisis: the decline of deep-sea fish populations. This article explores how a design thinking approach, guided by the principles of Ikigai, can pave the way

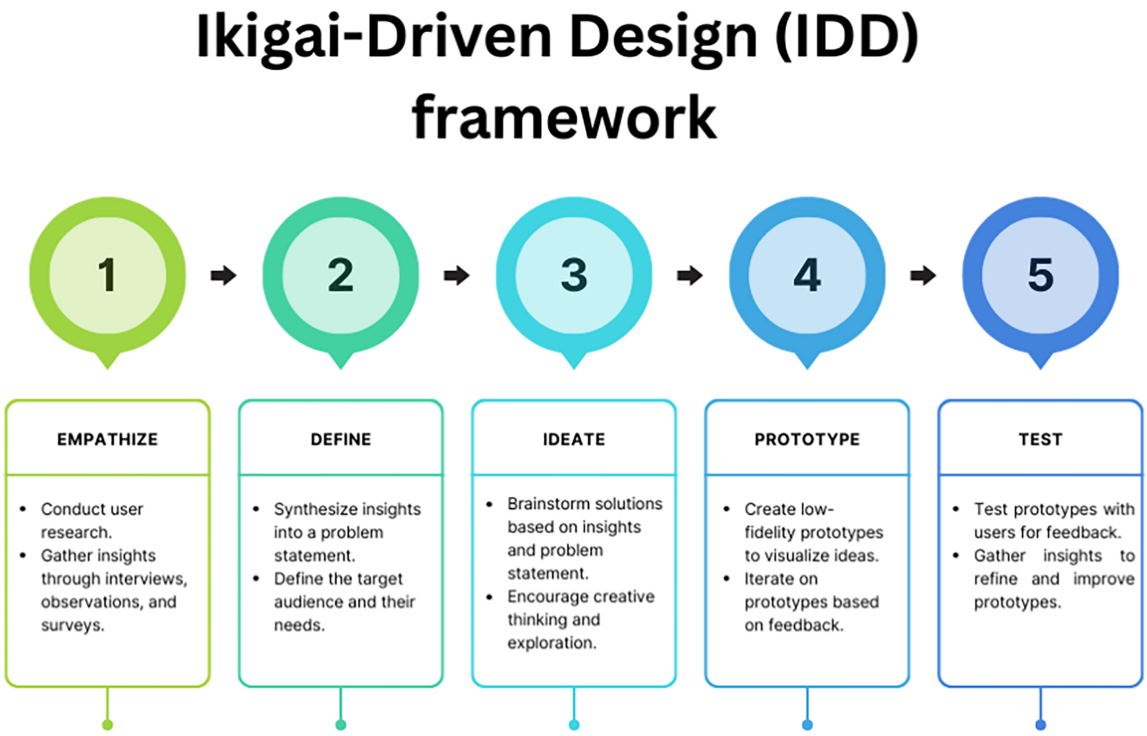

Fig. 1. The Ikigai-driven design framework workflow.

for a solution that benefits both the environment and the fishing industry [16].

6.3. The deep-sea fish connection: A hypothesis

Recent research suggests a link between specific deep-sea fish populations and ocean temperature regulation. These specialized fish, through their biological processes and ecological roles, might play a part in maintaining a natural oceanic balance. Uncontrolled deep-sea fishing in recent decades could have inadvertently disrupted this delicate equilibrium, contributing to rising global temperatures.

Design Thinking with Ikigai: Finding Harmony

Design thinking, with its emphasis on human-centered solutions and iterative problem-solving, offers a framework to address this challenge. Here's how Ikigai principles can be integrated:

Empathize with the Ocean: Understanding the ocean ecosystem, including the role of deep-sea fish, becomes paramount. Scientific research and data analysis are crucial at this stage.

Define with Purpose: The problem statement needs to consider not just temperature reduction but also protecting biodiversity and ensuring a sustainable future for the oceans. Ikigai's focus on purpose can guide this definition.

Ideate with Innovation: Brainstorm a range of solutions that go beyond simply banning deep-sea fishing. This could involve:

Identifying specific fish species critical for temperature regulation. Implementing quotas and regulations for sustainable deep-sea fishing. Exploring alternative fishing practices with minimal ecological impact.

Prototype with Responsibility: Pilot programs can be implemented to test the effectiveness of proposed solutions. This phase can involve collaboration with fishing communities to find workable solutions.

Test with Impact: Continuously monitor the impact of implemented solutions on deep-sea ecosystems and global temperature. Ikigai's emphasis on finding solutions that create a positive impact becomes crucial here.

Finding the Ikigai of the Ocean

This approach goes beyond just tackling climate change. It seeks to identify solutions that align with the "Ikigai" of the ocean–a state of balance where the ecosystem thrives, fishing communities flourish, and the needs of future generations are considered. The hypothesis of deep-sea fish influencing global temperature needs further scientific exploration. However, the design thinking framework with Ikigai principles provides a valuable starting point for tackling this multifaceted challenge. Collaborative efforts involving scientists, policymakers, and the fishing industry

are needed to ensure a sustainable future for our oceans and our planet. By focusing on solutions that benefit both humans and nature, we can move towards a world in harmony.

7. Concluding remarks

So, the next time you embark on a design thinking project, consider incorporating the wisdom of Ikigai. It might just help you discover your own design Ikigai – a process that is both personally fulfilling and leads to impactful solutions for the world. By incorporating Ikigai principles, design thinking becomes a more holistic and meaningful process. It allows you to not only create innovative solutions but also solutions that resonate with your own sense of purpose and the passions of your users. Moreover, our proposed approach goes on taking a deeper look at deep sea ecosystem goes beyond just tackling climate change. It seeks to identify solutions that align with the "Ikigai" of the ocean – a state of balance where the ecosystem thrives, fishing communities flourish, and the needs of future generations are considered.

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